

research snapshot

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Healthy Relationships with Food Do Not Come Easily with Pressures from Work



What is this research about?

North America can be described as having a “convenience culture.” That is, our eating habits and lifestyles are often centred on preparing food in the easiest and quickest ways. The costs of such habits are seen on our health, environment, culinary skills and on the rights of workers and farmers. The movement to “re-engage” with our food asks us to be more conscious shoppers, cook from scratch, and even grow our own food. However, this attitude does not address the reality of work situations in the household. The way we prepare our foods is shaped by gender and racialized inequities. So how do we begin to change our food habits and address these limitations?

What did the researcher do?

The researcher began with looking at food under the lens of social reproduction. Social reproduction looks at the different types of labour in society today, and how certain types of work are more valued than others. The researcher explained that unpaid work—especially work in the home (which is largely done by women) - is often not seen as having economic value. Thus, policy does not prioritize the value and costs of food work.

The researcher spoke of the changes in household food work with the nature of paid employment. This included the gap between genders and food work.

What you need to know:

Food work today is more complex than simply developing better habits. It involves looking at the nature of work today as well as gender relations.

Finally, she suggested ways that the existing food system can be transformed for a re-engagement with food.

What did the researcher find?

The researcher noted that paid work today has tensions with the ability to do unpaid work like food preparation. Most adult women now work outside of the home. Also, many adults rely on a mix of low paid, part time or temporary work, or alternatively, work very long hours. The struggle to balance paid and unpaid work has emerged, with fewer households that are able to have one person commit to social reproduction like food work. While healthy food preparation is encouraged, women are usually targeted over men. Working women may not always have the time to engage in food work. Marginalized women, who may have to juggle more than one low paying job, or may not be able to afford healthier convenience food options bear additional burdens.

In order to make healthier and more sustainable food habits more achievable, the researcher suggested that:

- Work schedules should be more flexible and less demanding. This would include opportunities for reduced or flexible hours, or benefits for part time workers. It would also ask employers to consult with individual workers before making important changes to work conditions or schedules.
- Cooking should be encouraged among men and boys. While there are more women in the workplace today, there has been little increase in men doing food work at home. While there are more male cooks in the professional realm of food preparation, food work should be prioritized at home by both genders.
- The benefits of collective action should be seen. There are limits to what we can do as individuals. But if we share the responsibility of food work, at the level of the home, work and with partners like the government and businesses, healthier eating is possible. For example, improving food labelling laws can make shopping and cooking easier.

How can you use this research?

This research could be used by both community partners and businesses, especially those in the field of health and nutrition. It offers insights on how to make healthier eating a group process that can benefit from the investment of different partners. It may also be useful for practitioners to understand the challenge individuals have with eating healthy. The research also shares important suggestions for changes to policy that deal with both the way our food is made, and the labour behind this process, and changes in work security.

About the Researcher

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Keywords

Poverty eradication, Cooking/food preparation, Food, Employment, Gender

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